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Spelling in the New National Curriculum

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How did you learn to spell? Did you learn spelling rules? Can you name one?

We'd be willing to bet that most readers chose "i before e except after c". We'd have a small wager that many people would find it difficult to think of another rule. Why do we remember "i before e except after c", and why is it so often cited by those who favour mnemonics and memory aids? The most likely reason is that it rhymes – it certainly isn't because it is a reliable spelling rule: it isn't! Look at some of the many exceptions below and then decide if it is a rule worth knowing or if, perhaps, it needs to be adapted or modified:

beige, codeine, conscience, deify, deity, deign, eider, eight, either, feign, feint, feisty, foreign, forfeit, freight, heifer, height, heinous, heir, heist, neigh, neighbour, neither, prescient, rein, science, seismic, seize, sheik, society, sovereign, surfeit, veil, vein, weight, weir, weird

The limitations of "i before e except after c" (it makes a little more sense if you make it "i before e except after c" when the word rhymes with me") should not prevent us from exploring spelling rules and generalisations. There are actually some very reliable rules and generalisations, despite the complex grapheme-phoneme code of our language. Consider:

- Which letters are not used to end English words?
- What do you do to make a noun ending with "y" plural?
- Which letter almost always follows "q"?
- Do any English words begin with a double consonant?

There are many more, and these can be the subject of investigations by children as they seek strategies which they can apply more widely in their writing. As teachers, we need to explore our spelling system so that we can guide children's learning and give them strategies for tackling tricky words. We need to be able to break words into morphemes (individual units of meaning), so that we can help children both to spell and understand vocabulary. So we might discuss the prefix *un-* and how it can modify the meaning of words (*usual, likely, friendly*), or we may consider the root words which prefixes and suffixes can modify. This requires an appreciation of etymology (word origins) and the knowledge that English is derived from Germanic and Gallic languages, as well as from Latin, Greek and many other sources.

The new National Curriculum for England includes prescribed lists of words which children should learn to spell at different stages. Thankfully, the lists have been revised in the series of drafts of the curriculum, with some rather odd choices being replaced by words children might actually encounter in their reading and writing – we particularly welcomed the removal of the word *haughty* from the Y5-6 list! The lists could become a burden to children and teachers if they simply provide a source for weekly spelling lists and tests, but this need not be the case. What is important is that children are not simply tested on spelling after being given words to learn, but that they are taught spelling through a range of strategies which will not only help them to learn the required spellings, but will also help them to develop a deeper understanding of words. We maintain that if the word lists are

taught well, children will actually learn around five times the required number of spellings and will have well-established strategies for reading and spelling new words.

Look, for example, at five words from the Y3-4 list: *answer*, *appear*, *arrive*, *believe* and *bicycle*. Now see how many words you can create from each by adding prefixes and suffixes. For example, *answer* could become *answers*, *answered*, *answering*, *answerable*, *unanswered*, *unanswerable*. See how many words you can make from the other four (answers at the end of the article). Although not all the words in the list can be modified in this way, the vast majority can be. As a second activity, go through the Y3-4 list and try to identify any words which cannot be modified (again, answers can be found at the end).

If children explore words in this way, checking their suggestions using a dictionary or spell-checker, they will develop strategies for modifying other words which do not appear in the lists. They will deepen their understanding of word building and the way words can be segmented into morphemes to spell and understand meanings.

Learning to spell is inextricably linked to broadening vocabulary and understanding grammar. For example, when you know that adding the suffix *-ly* to a word can change an adjective into an adverb (*quick* – *quickly*, *careful* – *carefully* etc) then you are better able to form accurate sentences. Similarly, developing an understanding of the meanings of a range of prefixes is invaluable when new words are encountered. The great benefit of understanding these prefixes and suffixes is that their spellings are generally fixed and consistent, meaning that learning to spell a word like *unanswerable* need only focus on the morpheme *answer* and the “tricky” *w*. Children can gain satisfaction for being able to spell multi-syllable words and can apply their knowledge more widely.

Central to the teaching and learning of spelling is a knowledge of potential strategies for learning words. In addition to the above, we might consider:

- An oral-visual strategy such as *look, say, cover, write, check* in which we focus on a word, say it, cover it up, attempt to spell it, and then check if we were correct, repeating the process if we were not.
- Breaking words into syllables so that we can hear the sounds of each part of the word – *Oc-to-ber*.
- Over-syllabification in which we identify a “tricky” part of a word which may not normally be sounded such as in *Wednesday* and *February*, and then say the word with the sound included when we need to spell it (*Wed-nes-day*, *Feb-ru-ary*).
- Learning words by analogy with others with similar spellings – could, would, should; bright, night, right etc.
- Finding the base or root word within a word and learning the different morphemes (units of meaning) and their spellings – *women* – *wo+men*, *building* – *build+ing*.
- Creating *mnemonics* to remember a tricky letter sequence – could - can old ugly lions dance?

There is much more to teaching and learning to spell than sending children home with lists of words and then testing them. The danger with that approach is that we think we have taught spelling because we have tested it and neglect to give children strategies for learning spellings. Despite the challenges presented by English’s alphabetic code, it is possible to learn how to spell accurately and

well when teachers support children's learning by modelling a range of simple but effective strategies and taking a keen interest in words themselves.

Answers to questions in the article

Possibilities for modified words include:

appears, appearance, disappearance, appearing, disappear, disappearing, reappear, reappearance, reappears, reappeared

arrives, arrived, arriving, arrival

believes, believer, believed, believing, believable, disbelieve, disbeliever, disbelieving, non-believer, unbeliever, unbelieving, unbelievable

bicycles, bicycled, bicycling

You may have found more!

Words which cannot be modified:

Caught, enough, perhaps, potatoes, therefore, although, through, women – although *although*, *potatoes* and *women* have already been modified from *though*, *potato* and *woman* respectively, so two words can be learned for each.